

Freedom of the Press

Croatia formally became the 28th member state of the European Union (EU) on July 1, 2013. The accession process was successful in exerting some pressure on the Croatian government to fight corruption and create the conditions necessary for independent media to flourish. As amended in June 2010, the constitution recognizes freedom of the press as well as all citizens' right to information. Nevertheless, the state has often tolerated harassment of journalists and taken legal action against critical media outlets. Although libel had been partially decriminalized in Croatia, with the parliament removing imprisonment as a punishment in 2006, the new criminal code that took effect in January 2013 threatened some of the recent gains in media freedom. The new code reinforced libel as a crime and placed the burden of proof on the defendant. Journalist Jasna Babić was detained on January 22 as part of a criminal libel case against her that was initiated in 2009 by businessman Josip Radeljak. Although she was released after two days, the court could have held her for up to 30 days. Hate speech carries a maximum prison sentence of five years, and "insulting the Republic of Croatia, its coat of arms, national anthem, or flag" can lead to a three-year sentence.

In February 2013, Croatia adopted a new Law on the Right of Access to Information, both to meet EU requirements and in response to civil society's long-standing discontent with the previous law's implementation and provisions for access. The new legislation includes a proportionality and public-interest test and establishes an independent information commissioner to monitor compliance.

Media analysts have criticized the Council for Electronic Media, an independent regulator that licenses broadcast outlets, for its lack of transparency, including the fact that council members vote secretly on granting licenses. There is particular concern regarding the allocation of frequencies and the use of funds meant for the promotion of commercial television and radio productions. There is no licensing requirement for media that do not use the broadcast frequency spectrum. Outlets launched on other electronic communication platforms are only required to register with the media council and pay a nominal fee. Print media must register with the Chamber of Commerce.

The Croatian Journalists' Association (CJA), representing more than 90 percent of the country's active journalists, is considered a model for the region. The majority of Croatian journalists adhere to the CJA's code of ethics, and its Council of Honor is responsible for reviewing complaints from individuals, institutions, and companies. However, membership in the CJA continues to decline, reflecting dissatisfaction with its responses to the worsening conditions faced by journalists. In recent years, hundreds of journalists have been laid off, and hundreds more are working on a part-time basis without benefits.

The state-owned public broadcaster, Croatia Radio-Television (HRT), is funded through advertising revenue and licensing fees. During 2013, in an effort to strengthen its output, HRT began integrating its many media platforms. It is often seen as representing political interests and has been criticized for censoring and suspending programs without explanation, politicizing personnel decisions, lacking transparency, and failing to respect professional standards. Goran Radman, appointed by the parliament to serve as HRT's director general for a period of five years in October 2012, came under fire in 2013 for allegedly violating the Act on Prevention of Conflict of Interest in two separate ways—as a member of the supervisory board of Hypo Alpe Adria Bank and as the founder and chief executive of Nautar, a company

that engages in advertising and has clients that advertise on HRT.

In addition to serious concerns regarding HRT's management, the public broadcaster was criticized again in 2013 for attempts to censor journalists. In March, Katja Kušec, presenter of the primetime news show *Dnevnik 3*, along with Ružica Renić and Denis Latin, two of the show's editors, were removed from their positions after airing inflammatory and anti-Serbian comments by Ruža Tomašić, a lawmaker and head of the far-right Croatian Party of Rights dr. Ante Starčević. Tomašić claimed that the president of the Independent Democratic Serbian Party, parliament member Vojislav Stanimirović, had committed war crimes in the 1990s that resulted in the murder of 200 civilians. Following the airing of the show, Croatian prime minister Zoran Milanović criticized HRT for broadcasting hate speech; HRT, in turn, condemned the prime minister's statement as "intolerable pressure on media independence." HRT nonetheless defended its decision to remove the three journalists, citing their lack of professionalism.

Journalists, especially those covering corruption, organized crime, and war crimes, continue to face harassment and physical attacks as a result of their work, sometimes resulting in self-censorship, although fewer serious incidents took place in 2013 than in previous years. Journalist Domagoj Margetić, known for exposing money laundering and tax evasion at the Hypo Alpe Adria Bank in the mid-2000s, staged a hunger strike in March 2013 to protest the muzzling of journalists who cover corruption. But censorship is not confined to the political and business realms: in July, management at the Croatian soccer club GNK Dinamo Zagreb, unhappy with critical coverage by journalists from the web portal Index.hr, announced that reporters working for the portal would be prohibited from attending training sessions and games at the team's home stadium.

There are dozens of private television and radio stations, both local and national, and cable and satellite television access is common. While private media owners must be registered, the records are not easily accessible to the public and often do not clearly indicate who or what entity is behind the registered company names. Many private media owners hold interests in nonmedia businesses, creating commercial and political pressure that can reduce critical news coverage of the government and influential companies. Croatia's largest business conglomerate accounts for the largest advertising share in the country and also owns Tisak, the nationwide newspaper distributor. German-owned Europa Press Holdings and Austria's Styria control most of the print media market, raising concerns about concentration.

A decline in advertising revenue due to the global economic crisis, as well as rapidly dwindling newspaper circulations, have left many media outlets financially weak, leading to a blurring of the lines between journalism, advertising, and public relations. Not only are media outlets unable to publish articles that criticize their advertisers, but it is possible to find advertising pieces disguised as news articles. A number of media outlets are controlled by the banks that hold their loans and the advertising companies that provide much of their revenue. In order to survive, many outlets are publishing more "infotainment" stories, overshadowing mainstream news articles.

Over the past two years, journalists' salaries have dropped by 10 to 15 percent, forcing many reporters to take second and third jobs, and making the media vulnerable to outside influences. As journalists compete for a decreasing number of jobs and rush to put out content quickly, professional standards are declining. Journalists now rarely complete background research on the topics they report on, referring instead to industry "experts," whose opinions they are not equipped to challenge.

The government does not restrict access to the internet, which was used by 67 percent of the population during 2013. Croatians have access to a relatively large number of online media, including news publications, and readership of online sources is steadily climbing. Inconsistent standards for reporting and a lack of sustainable business practices, however, remain pervasive problems among internet-based news outlets.

2014 Scores

Press Status

Partly Free

Press Freedom Score

(0 = best, 100 = worst)

40

Legal Environment

(0 = best, 30 = worst)

9

Political Environment

(0 = best, 40 = worst)

16

Economic Environment

(0 = best, 30 = worst)

15